

# Pennsylvania Game Commission Funding for the 21st Century



Faced with declining capital reserves for several years, it has become necessary for the Game Commission to initiate a combination of cost containment and budget reduction measures to maintain agency operations within the constraints of new annual spending levels approved by the governor's budget office.

Although these actions have slowed the projected decline of the Game Fund's unreserved balance, they have not been without consequence in the Commission's major program areas. While the Commission struggles to remain a responsible steward of sportsmen's dollars, funding shortfalls are seriously impairing our ability to carry out the agency's mission, and, as a result, our wildlife resources and Pennsylvania sportsmen are being shortchanged.

Following is a brief overview of how reduced funding and budget cuts are impacting agency field operations and programs within the several major bureaus.

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## **LAND MANAGEMENT**

The Game Commission is the second largest landowner in the state with 1,386,000 acres of State Game Lands. But, today, our land acquisition program is at a virtual standstill. We are also the largest single farmer in Pennsylvania, cultivating over 10,000 acres annually. Under cooperative agreements, sharecroppers cultivate an additional 20,000 acres. Eight of the Commission's dams and waterfowl impoundments are in need of immediate repair. Seven of the eight have been declared by the Department of Environmental Protection as "high hazard" dams because of occupied homes downstream.

- Of 135 tractors, 44 are over 25 years old and difficult to service for lack of parts.
- Six of 37 crawler dozers fall into the same category and should be replaced.
- Habitat improvement projects have been scaled back.
- Infrastructure repairs and improvements have been deferred.
- Road and parking lot improvements have been delayed.
- At least 18 food and cover corps vacancies have gone unfilled.
- Another 51 employees are needed to bring the food and cover corps to full strength.
- Of 61 Food and Cover Corps units, 42 are currently understaffed.
- Five aging regional offices need immediate repairs. The sixth must be replaced.

The Bureau of Land Management estimates it will cost over \$2.1 million annually to fill required vacancies; over \$4 million to purchase new machinery and off-road equipment, and make necessary repairs and improvements.

## **WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT**

The Bureau of Wildlife Management has made significant cost reductions over the past several years that impact both wildlife research and the operation of the Commission's several game farms. Specific cost containments include:

- Closing the eastern game farm and eliminating eight positions.

Ten additional propagators have been eliminated at other game farms.

Ringneck pheasant production was cut back to 200,000. Bobcat population and harvest feasibility studies have been suspended.

The beaver management program and harvest studies have been postponed.

A furbearer biologist position remains unfilled.

Evaluation of the fisher reintroduction program is currently on hold.

Plans to reintroduce extirpated pine martins have been tabled.

Using seasonal employees to capture and tag bears, and to help gather capture data has been eliminated, diverting these responsibilities to WCOs and technicians.

Evaluation of the use and impacts of the aquatic vegetation cutter on target and non-target wildlife in our wetland ecosystems has been postponed.

Financial support to the Northeast Wildlife Disease Center has been suspended.

Deer-damaged farm participant surveys have been cancelled.

Telemetry studies and proposed research on wild turkeys, stream bank fencing, mallard recruitment and ruffed grouse are suspended by lack of funding.

The Bureau of Wildlife Management estimates that, since 1995, reductions in salaries, benefits, overtime, wages, operational expenses, fixed asset acquisitions and lack of grants to support research institutions have resulted in a net cost containment savings of almost \$1.1 million.

## **BUREAU OF LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Like all agency bureaus and regions, the Bureau of Law Enforcement has been adversely affected by budget restrictions and cost containment. Activities directly impacting the Bureau of Law Enforcement include:

The delayed purchase of mobile and portable handheld communication radios for field officers. The delay seriously interrupted planned radio replacement schedules requiring expenditures to maintain older and outdated existing units.

- Vital tools of wildlife conservation officers like aging uniform equipment including new winter coats and jackets, personal body armor, binoculars and night viewing devices are not being replaced.
- Incidents of human-black bear encounters are increasing, yet it's been necessary to reduce numbers of bear traps we can purchase. Once limited to urbanized northeast counties, nuisance bear complaints now come from almost every area of the state.
- Two vacancies in the special investigation unit remain unfilled. Lack of personnel makes it impossible to effectively carry the large case load of investigations involving commercial trafficking in unlawfully taken wildlife.
- Statewide training conferences were cancelled and none are scheduled for 1999. Firearms training has been limited to required qualifying shoots. Cut backs and delayed acquisition of equipment in the Bureau of Law Enforcement amounts to approximately \$539,000.

## **BUREAU OF AUTOMATED TECHNOLOGY**

The financial impact on automated technology during the extended hunting license debate has resulted in curtailment of some services — reductions in others. We are unable to keep abreast of latest technology or take advantage of technology upgrade opportunities. The other obvious indicator of our inability to provide services on a timely basis is a lack of trained personnel. Currently, we cannot properly support the technology already in place. Addressing equipment needs alone:

- Our mainframe is four years old. We replace it every five or six years. At a cost of \$400,000, it won't be possible without the license increase.
- Personal computers also need upgraded every four to five years. We try to replace about 20 percent a year. To improve efficiency and productivity, we have also begun to equip conservation officers with computers. The estimated cost for new and replacement computers is \$250,000.



- To meet new OA standards, a Windows NT server is required at \$50,000. Correspondence tracking systems to monitor correspondence and complaints on an agency-wide basis will require at least \$40,000.

Not considering costs for additional support personnel, we see an immediate need of \$750,000 to bring equipment up-to-date, maintain standards, and get computers to all officers in the field.

## BUREAU OF INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Implications of protracted under funding for the Bureau of Information and Education are many. To what extent budget constraints ultimately impact the bureau is difficult to analyze because of the many new and innovative programs envisioned during the next several years.

- Film is a thing of the past. Already, 95 percent of our films have been converted to video. Video is easier to maintain and far less expensive to replace.
- Our plan to have video projectors for each district officer by 1999 is sidetracked. We cannot provide quality, up-to-date, visual materials to our educational specialists, WCOs, deputies and HTE instructors without modern projection equipment.
- We need 60 to 70 video projectors at a cost of nearly \$200,000. It's impossible to accurately estimate the cost of other new equipment essential to our educational operations. But, it's well over \$350,000 — and closer to \$600,000 to acquire new live firing trailers we plan to deploy when funds are available.
- Hunter-Trapper Education is facing new and demanding challenges. The program must be completely overhauled to meet new national course standards. CD-ROM and the Internet are used to allow students to independently study portions of the HTE course. And, interactive video systems are being used throughout the country to recruit new hunters.
- Our six *wildlife education supervisors* are getting into hundreds of classrooms and advancing our education programs. Yet, too often, we don't have adequate personnel to handle requests from schools and teachers. We must deploy more educational specialists.

- We've planned for two years to employ a *marketing specialist*, a new position requiring additional funding.

Without substantial new revenues, many important and innovative I&E programs will suffer. We must have the skilled personnel, adequate modern communications equipment, and other interactive educational materials necessary to accomplish our mission in the 21st century.

## ADMINISTRATION, PERSONNEL AND TRAINING

The Commission's approved complement is 731. Currently, many positions are unfilled including 20 wildlife conservation officers, 18 Food and Cover Corps employees, and 13 clerical, technical and management personnel. The result is inadequate staff to accomplish our mission in areas including land management, habitat rehabilitation, law enforcement, education, communications and other important programs. We hope to graduate 14 new officers next March, a class delayed a year while awaiting authorized funding. Additional officers will retire soon, creating more unfilled districts. Another class is anticipated next year, yet it will still take until the year 2000 to fill all vacant districts and restore field operations to a normal degree of productivity. Without a license increase, open clerical, technical and management positions will remain vacant. In addition to monies saved through personnel cuts backs, the automotive fleet budget was reduced by \$200,000; another \$65,000 through elimination of toll-free telephone service.

### YOUR INPUT IS CRITICAL

A Pennsylvania hunting license is among the lowest and best buys in the nation. It provides hundreds of hours of great outdoor recreation. Between now and November, both the House and Senate will again deliberate the merits of a license increase that would raise Commission revenues by \$12 million annually. Your opinions are important. Please write your state representative or senator at the following address: Senate Post Office or House Post Office, Main Capitol Building, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120